

Sunday morning July 1st 2018 at CBC
Sermon outline: Isaiah 43.1b
A word to a fallen church in a fallen world

INTRODUCTION

But now, this is what the Lord says—

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” [NIV]

In the middle of all this encouragement we find *“fear not/do not be afraid”*. Now the expression ‘do not fear/be afraid’ is found quite often in the Bible. It is a word of reassurance to those who have become fearful when faced with a threat of one kind or another. But here in Isaiah 43, surely the people of God are safe and secure! God himself has brought them into being and redeemed them and called them. There is no reason to be afraid, surely.

[1] THE TRAGEDY OF A DEFEATED CHURCH

The problem the Lord’s people are facing here is not simply the hostility of the world. There is certainly hostility, a literal, physical hostility. We can see in the previous chapter in verse 22. But the reason they are a defeated people is that the Lord himself has brought about their defeat. See 42.24. In fact there is a double tragedy here.

[a] the Lord’s servant (messenger) is deaf and blind

In 42.19 The people of God (Israel) are described, amazingly, as blind (my servant) and deaf (the messenger I send).

Now this astonishing for two reasons:

[i] These are the people whom the Lord had created, formed, redeemed and summoned [43.1].

[ii] These are people before whom the Lord had made his law great and glorious [42.21] and to whom the Lord had shown many things [42.20].

How can these people, with the benefit of such privileges, be deaf and blind? – See 42.20. They are not paying attention to the Lord, they are not listening to Him. Now if any church is going to grow and develop, it must always first recognise that it may have become blind and/or deaf to God and his word.

[b] The world is deaf and blind

The Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, is saying to the surrounding nations, *'look, you deaf and blind – if you want to see real deafness and blindness, look at my very own people!'*

The Lord's servants are to bring light to those in darkness! But what if the very people who are meant to help the blind and deaf are themselves blind and deaf? Then, literally, the blind are leading the blind. And we all know where that ends up.

[2] THE REMEDY FOR A DEFEATED CHURCH

How would the people of God in Isaiah's day benefit from these wonderful words at the start of chapter 43? If we can find the answer, we shall then know how we can benefit from them today.

[a] accepting corporate responsibility

Isaiah's role as a prophet was to speak God's word into his generation. In practice, that meant Isaiah addressing the people as 'you'.

But in 42.24 he says: *Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned?*

[b] returning to the Lord's mercy

Why does Isaiah need to say, 'do not fear'?

Surely it is because the people are in fear of the consequences of their sin. They are afraid that the Lord has finished with them. It is a reasonable fear. Why should he persist with them? The Lord can always make other plans. So the people in Isaiah's day had good reason to be worried. The Lord surely did not absolutely need them!

Maybe not – but neither had he abandoned them. And that is why he reminds them, through Isaiah, of what he has done for them. And so these words are of particular encouragement whenever we may feel that the Lord has abandoned us, whether we think we have deserved to be abandoned or not. What then, should we remember in any time of apparent (or actual) abandonment by the Lord?

[i] The origin of our existence

It is very clear in the NT, notably in John's gospel, that Christians owe their spiritual life to the Lord. None of us would be believers in Christ had he not first given us life. That should encourage us, especially if we think the Lord might give us up.

[ii] the fact of our redemption

Even though the people in Isaiah's day had been deaf and blind, deliberately so, the Lord was telling them that his commitment to their redemption trumped their failure.

[iii] The nature of our calling

John 10:27-29: My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Now you might think that a person becomes a sheep (as it were) by virtue of the fact that they respond to the call. But when you look into it, you find that, mysterious as it certainly is, the call of Jesus comes to those who are, somehow already being seen as sheep and it is the call and their response to the call that identifies them as sheep.

In John 14 Jesus famously said: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God^[a]; believe also in me.* But immediately before that, he had foretold the failure of Peter.

Amazingly, Jesus was committed to his disciples in spite of the failure he knew was coming.

May the Lord's remarkable grace encourage us all, and to God shall be all the praise and the glory!